

Q: Good afternoon.

A: Good afternoon.

Q: Today is Thursday, October 6 2016, and I am here at the Law Library in City Hall in Newton, Massachusetts with Robert Paul Whitten, known as Bob, and together we are participating in the Newton Talks Oral History Project that is being conducted with the Newton Free Library, Historic Newton, and the Newton Senior Center. I would like to start by asking you some questions.

A: Sure.

Q: What is your connection to Newton?

A: I reside in Newton. I have resided in Newton for probably 35 years, and in two locations in Newton.

Q: Okay. And what were you doing before you entered the service?

A: I was in Law School.

Q: And where were you stationed?

A: I was in Law School at Boston College Law School. I had been in the ROTC in Boston College. I got out of Boston College in 1962, out of the Law School in '65. I hadn't served on Active Duty after my commissioning in 1962. The government sent me notification I was being ordered to Active Duty, and I was first sent down to Fort Gordon, Georgia. I was in the Signal Corps and I was sent down there for the Basic Officer School. At the conclusion of my Basic Officer Training I get an assignment where you're going to go next. That assignment happened

to be to the Schenectady Army Depot in Schenectady, New York. I was trained as a Signal Corps Officer. I went there as a Chief Transportation Officer at the Depot, something totally outside of my training. And I was there for six or seven months. And then I got a set of orders ordering me down to the Pentagon, because they needed somebody to do two, actually three things, one to rewrite the army life insurance program as part of study group, that was number one, number two was to participate in the Cuban Officer United States Army program that they had for the Cuban Officers who were landed at the Bay of Pigs and were subsequently interned as Prisoners of War, and the third thing was to rewrite the army personnel program, a thing called RAPIDS, which was Random Access Information Disseminator System. They've got an acronym for everything that they do.

So that's what I was down there for. At that point I was a First Lieutenant. I came out of Active, going on Active Duty I was a Second Lieutenant, after two days down in Fort Gordon, Georgia they discovered I should have been a First Lieutenant, even though I wasn't in the Judge Advocate General School, so I was made a First Lieutenant. Then I went to Schenectady as a First Lieutenant, I went down to the Pentagon, and I was the lowest ranking Officer in the entire wing of the Pentagon that I was in. So they promoted me to a Captain and I stayed that way until I got out.

Q: Now, did you choose that specific branch, the Signal Corps, or were you assigned?

A: No, I didn't ask for the Signal Corps. I was assigned that.

Q: And how did you adapt to military life? That could include the physical regimen, the barracks, the food, the social life, anything.

A: I'm kind of an odd duck in that regard. I adapted very, very well, because number one nobody was shooting at me, number two I wasn't living in a tent, and number three I had very comfortable living conditions and I was free actually as a bird. I mean at 5:00 at night I was on

my own, and I didn't start until 7:00 the next morning. So, it wasn't that you were hearing all kinds of stuff at night. I lived in a private apartment from the Pentagon, I lived at Southern Towers, and it's the Schenectady Army Depot, I had my own apartment right on the Depot. Down at Fort Gordon, Georgia I was in a Bachelor Officer's quarter, but because I was a First Lieutenant I had a living room, a very small kitchen, and a good sized bedroom and a balcony, so I did alright.

Q: How did you stay in touch with family and friends back home?

A: Well, that was easy, because whenever I wanted to fly back home I did. I didn't have to work on the weekends. Nobody was calling me on the weekends. And I would just fly. And at that point if you flew in uniform you flew with 50% of the cost of the flight and they always managed for one way or another, they always managed to find a seat in First Class for you, so it was good. My relatives came down to Washington fairly frequently, because they liked Washington, there is a lot to see there. So, it really wasn't a bad transition.

Q: Was your family based in Boston?

A: Yes. Yeah, they were based in Chelsea. Then they subsequently all moved to Newton.

Q: Okay. Do you remember arriving and what it was like at the different places where you served?

A: Yeah, very vividly. I had to go to Fort Gordon, Georgia again for Basic Officer School. I had been in Law School for three years and I hadn't donned the uniform in three years. I didn't have a uniform at that particular point, because they had changed the way that the uniforms looked. So I mean I arrived at Fort Gordon, Georgia just dressed as a civilian, and of course you're not supposed to do that, but I had an excuse. Once I got there I then went out and bought a uniform

and all of that, several uniforms. Yeah, I remember that vividly, and again at Schenectady it was totally different. I had a uniform and I had arrived in a formal and proper manner.

Q: And how about the Pentagon?

A: The Pentagon, yeah, in a formal manner. That lasted about one day. At that particular point they were having massive demonstrations against the war and we all wore civilian clothes. I had an office and the only way that you would know that I was in the Army was it said Captain Whitten at the front of the, there was a little nametag at the front of that thing. But no, we never wore a uniform. The only time we wore a uniform was to get promoted, to go to somebody's promotion party, to a Christmas party, and to fly back and forth to home. But you couldn't, you couldn't wear a uniform down there. I mean people would raise hell with you.

Q: Interesting. Tell me about a few of your most memorable experiences, positive or negative, during your time in service?

A: Well, again, I'm odd in that regard in that I can't remember anything that was negative. I can remember positive, waking up in the middle of the night to a telephone call, at that time I could hear the phone, I wasn't deaf, and I picked up the phone and said, "Hello" and the phone at the other end was my immediate superior who was a Major General, and he said, "Bob, get everybody in the office." He said, "The Egyptian-Israeli conflict has broken out." He said, "And we've got to go in there, because," he said, "we've got men on both sides, representatives of the United States Army on the Egyptian side and we've got representatives on the Israeli side, so we've got to get in and manage this thing." And I think we were in there three or four days without sleep or doing anything else. I mean we just had to get those guys the hell out of there.

Schenectady was different. Schenectady was really an outpost, and I was on, I was on as a Duty Officer at night and one of the people came in and he had a, like a fax from Washington D.C. that a soldier had been killed in Vietnam and we had to go out and tell the mother and the father and

the family and notify them of that fact. And those instructions, you've got to get dressed in your dress blues, you've got to have a driver, you've got to know your way around. We went to the police station and somebody knew the mother and father, so they brought us directly to the house. They told us that they were a religious family, so we got the Minister that they were involved, and of course we went up, I rang the bell, and the mother came to the door, saw me, saw the Minister, passed dead away. But we had to stay there and make sure the body was okay and everything.

Q: Wow. That's hard.

A: That was tough. I can't think of any other thing.

Q: Okay. Do you recall the day your service ended?

A: I do. I do very, very vividly, because again my boss who was a Major General at that time tried to get me to stay. He said, "You're a Captain now." He said, "I'll make you a Major." He said, "Just stay. We'll give you a command position in Vietnam." And I said to him very frankly, I said, "Sir, I appreciate that very much. I want to go back to Chelsea." And I'm sure if he knew where Chelsea was he would say, "Why the hell?" [Laughter] "What's wrong with this guy?" But yeah, they wanted me to stay, and if I had stayed I had some people that I graduated with that stayed in, one is a Lieutenant General, I mean they really did well, but I didn't, I opted to go back home and the rest is history.

Q: What was it like to return to civilian life?

A: Well, again I had a background as a lawyer. It was good. I wanted to find a job. I found a job very easily and, unlike today with young lawyers. But it wasn't that much different, again because we were in an environment where you're not in tents, you're in Officers'. The two years

I was there I was in an office almost continually. So then to get out it was just a different change of offices. I mean so yeah, it wasn't much of a, it wasn't much of a hassle.

I had one health problem with high blood pressure and I got that treated at the VA and still get that treated today.

Q: How did your service and experiences affect your life and your outlook on war and the military in general?

A: Well, war is really a necessary evil, unfortunately, but how did it affect me in terms of life, yeah you had a certain discipline, discipline that was both imposed upon you and discipline that you imposed, imposed upon you from the outside, and discipline that you imposed upon yourself from inside. And you had an assignment, you had to get it done, you had to do whatever it took to get something done. That type of thing has stayed with me all through life. And you care about your fellow associates, because in a military situation I mean you could be ordered to the front somewhere and you could be depending on these guys to cover you and they're depending on you to cover them.

And then leadership skills, I mean you've got to motivate the people that are underneath you to do what a lot of people would regard as impossible tasks. I mean it had to be awful. I mean I was the point person for the President of the United States at the Department of Army for the Cuban Officer Program for these Cuban Officers, and they were getting shot up to beat the [00:13:20] Vietnam, and of course you get a different story. You hear the President of the United States in an address to the people would say, "We don't have any people in North Vietnam." And yet we would get the medical reports, the action reports, and they wouldn't put where they were, but they had the coordinates on the map. Well you can read a map. You look at the map and it was outside of Hanoi. What do you mean? You couldn't get more North Vietnam than that. But yeah.

Q: What would you like people to know one hundred years from now?

A: That it was a distinct honor and a privilege for me to serve. And I think it's a valuable, it's valuable service for anybody, male or female.

Q: Okay. It looks like our time is just about up.

A: Okay.

Q: Is there one more thing you haven't covered about your service?

A: I'll go back to the Cuban Officer thing. One of the highlights of my career was that I represented the President of the United States at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier when they had the anniversary of the Bay of Pigs, and that was unbelievable. I mean you've got guards all around you. They're carrying the bouquet back and you're marching in. It was on television. It was quite a thing. But that was a high point too.

Q: Who was the President then?

A: The President then was Lyndon Johnson and I reported to his Special Assistant was a gentleman by the name of Joseph Califano. Yeah.

Q: Well, thank you so much for taking the time to do this with us. We're really happy to be able to include you in the Newton Talks Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW